

Continuing Your Education After High School?

A few suggestions...

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Not that long ago, I was a typical high school senior faced with the daunting task of "planning for my future." Though this can be an exciting time in anyone's life, it's also a time filled with doubt and uncertainty. As graduation drew closer, I realized the time had come for me to begin making some decisions about my future. With that rather scary thought in mind, I spent a great deal of my

senior year maintaining good grades, visiting and applying to colleges, and working at a part-time job. When it was all said and done, my hard work paid off, and I graduated from high school with a scholarship to the university of my choice.

Now that high school is over and I'm attending college, I can look back on the past few years and see what I did right, as well as what I did wrong. To help you better navigate through the difficult process of deciding what you want to do after high school here are some basic tips and advice. First things first, you need to decide whether or not you want to continue your education after you graduate. If so, continue reading. If not, see "From High School to the World of Work" in box on pg40.

As soon as you make this decision, I suggest you compile a list of the qualities you are looking for in a school (ie: tuition costs, SAT/ACT requirements, location, housing and living conditions, entertainment and cultural opportunities, religious affiliation, size, financial aid, clubs and organizations, and opportunities for growth and success). Another important step is to decide what it is you want to study. If you are already certain about what you want to do, then you should look for schools that both offer programs in that area and that satisfy the various qualities on your list. There are many resources available to students that provide guidance and assistance in compiling a list of schools to choose from. One resource in particular is the New Hampshire Higher Education Assistance Foundation (see article, Pg39).

If you haven't yet decided what you want to do, as is the case with many of us, then you should look for schools that offer a wide range of options. That way, once you eventually decide what you want to do, you will have a better

chance of being able to pursue your education at the school you're already attending. Don't feel like you have to choose a particular area of study before you go to college. If you're not sure, you can always apply as undeclared and satisfy your general education requirements before choosing your major. (About 25 percent of college freshmen enter as undeclared, according to *Issues in Advising the Undecided College Student*. (Herald News Teen Board "Seniors Face Major Decisions" by Michelle Boik www.ready-minds.com/about/news_2001_04.html).

Choosing a school with many academic options is also useful if you eventually decide to change your major. By attending a school with a wide range of academic options, it will be far easier for you to change your major without having to undergo any complicated changes. (Based on national surveys, over 70% of all students change from one major to another while they are in college, many of them more than once. Often undeclared students envy their friends with majors for their decisiveness but in fact many of these students feel some uncertainty about their choices. Remember it is better to take time to consider your options rather than decide too quickly and select a major which is not right for you.) (Center for Academic Advising and Adult Learning www.montclair.edu/pages/academicadvising/ufaq.htm)

After you've created your list of potential schools to apply to, the next step is to visit as many of them as possible. I went on the majority of my college visits during the summer before my senior year. Whenever you visit different universities, there are always a wide range of tours, activities, and information available to you. Make sure you take advantage of all these opportunities in order to learn the most about each school as possible.

Once you've narrowed down your choices based on your college visits, it's time to fill out your applications, gather necessary test scores and high school transcripts, and request letters of recommendation. To get college applications, you can either contact the school itself by mail or the internet, or you can usually obtain them from your high school guidance counselor. Many schools also offer downloadable copies of their applications on their websites. Don't wait too long to fill out your applications, because if you encounter a problem at the last minute, it could potentially jeopardize your chances of making a

deadline and being accepted. At the same time that you are filling out your applications, you also need to be getting recommendations from some of the teachers and various other authority figures that you've dealt with over the past few years. For this, I recommend choosing not only the teachers whose classes you did well in, but also those whose classes provided you with a challenge. By doing this, you'll be more likely to get recommendations that focus more on your personal ambition and work ethic, rather than recommendations that simply focus on your grades and how nice of a person you are. Colleges are looking for people who are well rounded and determined, not people who get good grades without challenging themselves. Therefore, you should get your recommendations from a wide range of teachers, employers, supervisors, and coaches who can testify more to your positive attributes than to just your grades and accomplishments.

Arguably the most important part of the application is the essay, so you need to give yourself plenty of time to do it. The essay serves as an opportunity for you to connect with admissions staff on a personal level that is not possible through your application and recommendations alone. As such, your essay needs to give the reader insight into the type of person you are, and ultimately help schools determine whether or not you deserve admission.

One way that you can devote more time to writing your essay is by using the Common Application, available at www.commonapp.org. This is a simple application accepted by over 250 colleges and universities from around the country. All you need to do is fill out one copy and send it to the schools on your list that accept it. It's not uncommon for schools accepting the Common Application to request the completion of other supplemental forms as well. These forms usually ask for little more than additional personal information or a few brief essays on specified topics. As someone who used the Common Application myself, I can say that it truly made the college application process much easier.

After sending out your applications, the next thing you need to do is decide how you are going to pay for tuition and other expenses. Tuition is expensive regardless of where you decide to go, and most people who attend college are paying off loans long after they graduate. If you're looking for a way to lessen your bills without going into debt, then you need to start looking into various scholarship opportunities. There are endless sources for scholarships out there, and it is up to you to find them. Remember, this is free money! What do you have to lose? Schol-

arships are awarded for a wide range of reasons, and from many different individuals and organizations. Scholarship awards may be based on athletic performance, achievement in the arts or entertainment, strong writing skills, or general academic performance, among other things. It's worth noting that many schools themselves award scholarships to students based on their academic or extracurricular performance. Therefore, it's important to maintain your grades and after school activities, whether that includes having a job or participating in different organizations, in order to be considered for some of these scholarships.

Once your applications and scholarship forms have all been sent out, there's nothing else you can do but wait for the results. The amount of time it takes to receive a reply varies by the size and policies of the school or organization. Most schools will mail you a letter of confirmation after they have received your application. If more than a month has passed since you sent out an application and you still haven't received confirmation, you should contact the school's admissions office to check on your application's status. Eventually, you will start receiving your response letters, and the difficult task of making your final decision will begin. When you receive your letters, you will be informed that you've been accepted, rejected, or put on a waiting list. Being put on a waiting list means that you have been neither accepted nor rejected, but that the school wants to give your application further consideration.

Now you need to make one final decision - what school to attend. You've probably already given this question some thought while waiting for your responses, so you'll be better prepared to decide. I had a hard time deciding what school to go to so, after narrowing down my list, I revisited the schools I was considering one last time. I also reviewed the list of qualities that I made earlier in the year. If you are unsure about where to go, I highly recommend doing this. What it came down to for me was whether or not I wanted to live in a rural or urban environment, and whether or not I could picture myself having a good time at each school. Ultimately, I chose the school where I felt most comfortable. I can't stress enough how important it is to follow your own wishes in this process, and not those of others. Remember, you're the one who is going to be living and studying there, so you need to make a decision that you're satisfied with.